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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: GAMING RUSSIA'S REACTION TO A KOSOVO UDI  
  
REF: MOSCOW 5434

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns: 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The fact that Russia has not confronted the U.S. at the most senior levels over the possibility of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence does not mean that Putin and his advisers are resigned to the outcome. Russian diplomatic self-confidence flows from its sense of European divisions, its conclusion that Kosovo could be a GOR "win-win," and a domestic electoral strategy that plays on Russian outrage over American unilateralism. Russia likely will increase the costs to the West of Kosovo's independence by challenging the legality of a UDI, stymieing efforts to integrate Kosovo into international institutions, flirting with the Kosovo "precedent," accepting a de facto partition of Northern Kosovo, encouraging trouble in Bosnia, and condemning the U.S. European unity, Chinese disengagement, and a strong private marker on Georgian territorial integrity are essential tools in pushing back. The further setback to popular perceptions of the U.S. in Russia will take longer to fix. End Summary

Russian Diplomacy on Auto-Pilot  
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¶2. (C) As the Troika's December 10 deadline approaches, Russia seems oddly relaxed about the impending policy train wreck, when American support for Kosovo's expected unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) hits up against Russian insistence on a negotiated solution. Less than one month from the conclusion of the Troika deliberations, Russian diplomacy has not shifted gears -- to the contrary, FM Lavrov regularly underscores the "red-line" that Kosovo's independence poses for the Russian leadership and the dangers of a Kosovo precedent for other frozen conflicts. Serbian FM Jeremic's November 22 visit to Moscow generated Lavrov's latest warning against UDI and call for continued negotiations. Yet there is none of the urgency in Moscow that one would expect, given the specter of Western unilateral recognition of Kosovo outside the UN framework, as well as the prospect of Western implementation of "supervised independence" over the objections of Serbia and Russia. The Russians have barely gone through the motions of high-level consultations with the U.S. on an issue that one Russian analyst described as the "diplomatic equivalent of the 1999 bombing of Belgrade." Putin, in his meetings with the President in Kennebunkport in July and Sydney in September, and with the Secretary and Secretary Gates during the October 22, studiously avoided any detailed discussion of Kosovo.

What Accounts for Russian Confidence over Kosovo?  
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¶3. (C) We believe that Russian self-confidence is fueled by:  
  
-- Expectations of EU Divisions: Russia calculates that the objections raised by some EU member states, as well as the

unease of others, will be sufficient to delay critical support by Germany until 2008, with Serbian presidential elections another potential pretext for further pushing back the policy timeline. As DFM Titov jokingly noted to the Ambassador, the Russian leadership expects that the West will preserve the sanctity of the extended Christmas, New Year, and Orthodox Christmas holiday periods.

-- Calculations that UDI Strengthens the Russian Hand: Russian official and policy communities firmly believe that a U.S.-driven recognition of Kosovo will produce unexpected and negative consequences that will haunt Western policymakers for generations. The U.S. will be saddled with a "bandit" state and responsible for an "Islamist virus" in the heart of Europe. As such, U.S. policymakers will have to answer for the unleashing of irredentist forces, unraveling of the Dayton Accords, violence that will flow from Serbian rejection of Kosovo's actions and the de facto partition that will ensue, as well as the reinforcement of Serbian grievances that will stymie the Balkans' integration into Europe. Despite "losing Kosovo," Russian experts say that Putin wins politically at home for his principled stand, which Russian parastatals and business will capitalize on to deepen bilateral economic ties and expand investment in Serbian infrastructure. In this context, Lavrov's anticipated letter to the EU, U.S., and Germany on the consequences of not stopping UDI (reftel) will be Russia's "final warning," setting the stage for an "I told you so."

-- Electoral Dynamic: Russia's election year emphasis on the "enemy at the gate," which features prominently in the Russian backlash against missile defense and CFE, extends to Kosovo. Experts tell us that Russia will paint U.S. decisionmaking outside the Security Council as consistent

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with a unilateralist policy course that resulted in the disastrous state of Iraq, and which threatens destabilizing military strikes against Iran. This spin reinforces the appeal of Putin's emphasis on the restoration of Russian power, a policy course that is endorsed across the political spectrum. Pro-Western liberals, ranging from Garry Kasparov, to Anatoliy Chubais and Vladimir Ryzhkov reinforce that the emotional backlash to UDI among the Russian public will have "disastrous" consequences for U.S.-Russian relations.

-- Confidence in Manipulating the Kosovo "Precedent:" While Putin has not tipped his hand, many analysts believe that Russia will trumpet, but ultimately pocket, the "Kosovo precedent." The application of UDI outside Kosovo will remain a sword of Damocles in Russia's hair-trigger relations with Georgia and a reminder to the Moldovan government of the need to keep Russian interests at the center of negotiations over Transnistria. Russia retains the option of provocative steps that fall short of recognition of Abkhazia or Transnistria, which will be justified by the GOR as a necessary response to the domestic political pressures generated by Kosovo's independence.

-- Conclusion that Russia Wins Both Ways: The policy community is primed to deliver a victory to the Russian government regardless of the outcome in Kosovo. If Kosovo's independence is deferred, Russia's policy is vindicated; if UDI is recognized, Russia's principled stand and Munich critique of the West (read: U.S.) is validated.

Expected Russian Reaction to UDI

14. (C) A win-win calculation does not preclude Russian actions to increase the cost of Kosovo's independence to the West. While Putin is the ultimate arbiter of the Russian reaction, with policy deliberations limited to a small circle of insiders, we believe the likely range of actions includes:

-- Challenge to UDI's Legal Basis: The GOR will oppose any

effort to justify Kosovo's supervised independence within the framework of UNSC 1244, or to link the standing-up of an ESDP mission to the current UN mandate, and will appeal to non-permanent UNSC members, China, and European fence-sitters. We expect Russia will move to close the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, assuming that Serbia concludes it infringes on its sovereignty in a post-UDI environment.

-- Non-recognition of Kosovo: In the absence of a negotiated settlement, Russia will not recognize Kosovo and will use its Security Council veto to ensure that Kosovo is not admitted into the United Nations.

-- Flirtation with Recognition of Abkhazia: On balance, we believe that the GOR would strongly prefer to avoid the prospect of instability in the North Caucasus during an election season that recognition of Abkhazia and the all-but-certain Georgian military response could generate. Despite frequent warnings from Lavrov not to underestimate the domestic pressure for Russian tit-for-tat declarations of independence, our best guess is that the Russian leadership will resort (at least as a first step) to less incendiary gambits: announcing new infrastructure or investment projects that further bind Russia to the breakaway Georgian province, the stationing of diplomatic personnel to provide consular services to the large "Russian" (or Russian passport holding) population, and higher-level engagement with the unrecognized regimes' leaders.

-- Acceptance of De Facto Partition or a "New Abkhazia" in Europe: While Russian leaders will reiterate that partition was not a solution advocated or sought by the GOR, they will accept de facto Serbian partition of Northern Kosovo as the natural consequence of UDI. Former Prime Minister (and favored Putin envoy) Primakov remains an open advocate of partition, and even moderate foreign policy analysts such as Dmitriy Trenin view it as the best possible outcome.

-- Tacit Encouragement of Republika Srpska: Officially, Russia will not walk back its support for Dayton and its agreement on the need to strengthen Bosnian federal institutions; in practice, however, it could intensify criticism of High Representative Lajcak, implicitly encourage Republika Srpska (RS) PM Dodik's actions to challenge Dayton, and fan Serbian efforts to draw a direct linkage between Kosovo and RS.

-- Condemnation of the U.S.: Russian officials will paint American assurances to the Kosovars as proof that the U.S. never supported a negotiated outcome. The Slavic/Orthodox Christian card, barely touched in the lead up to UDI (although the Serbian Deputy Foreign Minister recently was

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accorded a televised meeting with the Patriarch), likely will be played, intensifying domestic Russian disenchantment. Kosovo remains a neuralgic subject and a reminder of the foreign policy "humiliations" of the Yeltsin years; Russians will readily rally against U.S. actions.

Mitigating the After-effects of UDI

15. (C) We believe the following building blocks are necessary to limit the damage to U.S.-Russian relations and constrain Russian retaliatory policies:

-- Maintain European Unity: Strong German and French support for Kosovo's independence, ideally timed with (or before) U.S. recognition, would deny Russia the propaganda point that this is a U.S.-driven process. Maintaining EU unity and seamlessly standing-up both an ESDP mission and a potential OMIK follow-on organization would be powerful signals that Russia is isolated in its opposition.

-- Keep China on the margins: The fact that China has not

viewed Kosovo as a central issue has denied Russia a powerful one-two punch and reinforces the GOR's relative isolation in the Kosovo debate. An unsatisfactory outcome would be for a UDI to produce a closer Russian-Chinese alliance that slows U.S. and European policy efforts on both Kosovo and Iran.

-- Lay down unequivocal marker on Georgian territorial integrity: The U.S. should deliver a strongly worded private message to the Russians, coordinated with EU partners, reinforcing international rejection of a Kosovo precedent and spelling out the consequences of a Russian tit-for-tat recognition.

Comment

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¶6. (C) We should not misinterpret Russia's relaxed posture leading up to the conclusion of the Troika negotiations. UDI has all the makings of a trainwreck on an issue that ignites powerful emotions and evokes unpleasant historical memories. At this stage, managing the aftermath to reinforce areas of U.S.-Russian strategic cooperation and to minimize the potential for rash miscalculation -- particularly with respect to Georgia -- is essential.  
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